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Ms. Wray

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Paranoia

Shards of glass littered the ground all around. The front door slammed, and I was alone.

In the quiet, my knees gave away and I slid down to the floor. For a moment, I listened. In the distance the car rumbled to life and pulled out of the driveway. Once again the stillness condensed, thick and heavy.

The sound of music drifted into the hallway, muffled and distant. There hadn’t been time to turn off the radio before he left, and now I no longer cared enough to do so. My heart thudded hollowly in my chest

*It’s your fault you know.* The same thoughts kept coming back. *You blamed him for everything.* There was a stinging sensation behind my eyes. *You only ever thought of yourself.* I closed my eyes. *What did you expect?*

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“Ralph, is that you?” I called, reaching for an elusive glass in the cupboard. There was no reply, just the sound of scuffling in the hallway as he took off his shoes. “Ralph?” I repeated, turning around just as he entered the kitchen.

I was met with silence and a pair of downcast eyes.

“Ralph, honey… what’s the matter?” Concern crept into my tone. “Did something happen at work?”

This time he looked up.

He strode around the counter, falling heavily into one of the chairs, and ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. I waited for him to say something.

“Laid off.” He paused to clear his throat, his voice hoarse, “ I was—Charles said I could have the weekend to collect my stuff…”

A sense of helplessness washed over me, I suddenly felt completely overwhelmed. So many friends and neighbors had succumb to the depression. Even with Ralph’s job we had been struggling to put food on the table. So much of our happiness had been wasted the three years we had been married just trying to get by. Part of me wanted to sob, and the other part of me wanted to yell and scream in frustration.

Ralph saw the look on my face. “I… Ethel…” he trailed off, seeming unsure exactly what to say.

And suddenly, something in me snapped and I collapsed onto the floor, sobbing. Ralph stood up in alarm, scrambling around the counter to comfort me. I pushed him away. My fist tightened around the glass in my hand as if it were the only thing still keeping me together.

“I’m… I’m sorry Ethel. I—,” he began, flustered. Before he could continue, shards of glass exploded at his feet, dusting the floor in silver splinters. I lowered my arm and began to sob harder.

Wordlessly, Ralph stepped out of the kitchen. The steps creaked as he made his way to his own bedroom. The door clicked shut.

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The house was dark. Through puffy, swollen eyes, I stared at the ground, fighting back more tears. A trail of ants made their way past my line of vision, marching dutifully on. The sound of a marching band drifted into the kitchen from the radio, keeping the silence at bay. For a moment, it almost seemed as though the ants were marching in tune with the music, but the feeling soon passed. I sat there, staring at the ants for quite some time. They continued on, oblivious to my thoughts.

Like the ants before me, the seconds also marched on unabated by my struggles. The last thing I remember before succumbing to exhaustion was the time. It was a quarter to eight.

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I was born during the final days of The Great War, in November. My father had sustained a leg injury six months prior, so he was allowed to return home to support my mother. Father always insisted that my birth had been a real miracle. Mother took ill soon after discovering she was pregnant. The doctor insisted that it was unlikely I would survive, but my parents refused to give up hope.

In the end, both Mother and I emerged happy and healthy. Father often insisted that it was the spirit of war that was able to bring out the strength in Mother. Despite the pain she was in, she insisted on toughing it out because she wanted to prove that she was just as brave as Father. Father used to tease that it should have been her out on the warfront, claiming that he was a “damn useless soldier”. Mother would just laugh and playfully scold him for being a “damn useless husband” as well.

Supposedly Mother’s strength ran in the family, but I had never been much more than a coward.

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I awoke with a start. Strange sirens echoed off the walls of the house, leaving me disoriented and confused. Standing up on wobbly knees, I glanced around, trying to locate the source of the noise. The house was still dark, so I shuffled over to the nearest lamp, carefully avoiding the sea of glass, and turned it on. Somehow, the light brought a certain comfort with it. I glanced around the kitchen, taking in the sight of the chipped countertops and rickety furniture which all needed to be replaced, and sighed.

The sirens were soon replaced by the sound of an urgent broadcast. I edged around the counter, and made my way into the sitting room in order to figure out what all the peculiar commotion was about.

Over the radio, an announcer was speaking frantically into his microphone. From his frenzied speech, I gathered that he was located in a small town in New Jersey, reporting on some unusual occurrence that had drawn quite a crowd.

Before I could gain a real understanding of what was causing the distress, the announcer’s tone changed abruptly. Suddenly, he began speaking in a guarded, agitated tone, almost breathless. The sudden change left me unsettled, since I couldn’t figure out what caused the abrupt transition. The chair creaked as I sat down, anxious to hear more of the broadcast.

*Ladies and gentlemen, this is the most terrifying thing I have ever witnessed . . .*

His voice was hushed.

*Someone or . . . something… Peering out of that black hole… two luminous disks, are they eyes? It might be a face. It might be …*

I found myself leaning in, trying to catch every word, my curiosity getting the better of me. My nails dug into the wood of the armrest as I became engrossed in the events being described, both fascinated and apprehensive by what was described.

All of a sudden, a shrill cry rang through the house. I stood up so abruptly that the chair I was sitting in slid back several feet, shifting the carpet and causing the radio to slide a foot or so to the right, disrupting its signal.

Static flooded into the room. The telephone continued to ring. I took several deep breaths to calm my racing heart, composed myself, and picked up the receiver.

“Ethel? Ethel, is that you?” the voice was anxious.

“Mary?”

“Oh thank goodness I could reach you Ethel.” She gave a shaky sigh of relief. “Ethel, you have no idea how scared I am. Charles is out with some friends tonight, and I’m all alone right now and I—I was listening to the radio, Ethel, and I—” she sounded breathless.

“Mary, two deep breaths, alright?”

There was a pause on the other end. When she spoke again, her voice was more steady.

“I know I sound crazy, Ethel, but I turned on the radio, and I think we are at *war…*” her voice grew hushed. “What does it all mean, Ethel?”

The thought of war hadn’t occurred to me.

“Oh lord, please have mercy…” She sounded nervous again.

I knew I had to say something before she got hysterical.

“Mary, they never said it was war, right?” I paused more a moment, just to be sure. When there was no response, I continued. “If we were really at war, they would have made it very clear, don’t you think?”

“I suppose…” she trailed off.

Mary always had a tendency over-dramatize things.

“That’s the spirit! Look,” I began, “I’m sure Charles will be home soon enough. Why don’t you just turn off the radio and wait for him to return? I’ll give you a ring if something important happens, alright?”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. I bet it’s the wine that’s getting to me.” She giggled.

“Say hello to Charles, won’t you Mary?” I called.

“Will do.” She replied.

With that she hung up, and a blanket of static closed in around me. I glanced around the room, turning over the conversation in my head. The thought of war filled my heart with dread.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spied the radio. “I suppose there’s only one way to find out…” I muttered to myself, approaching the radio. I fiddled with the dials, flipping through station after station, each one crackling to life, only to be replaced by static again. Finally, after much searching, I found the proper station. A new announcer was speaking, his voice sounded grim.

*Incredible as it may seem, both the observations of science and the evidence of our eyes lead to the inescapable assumption that those strange beings who landed in the Jersey farmlands tonight are the vanguard of an invading army…*

I stared at the radio in utter disbelief, wondering if I had heard correctly.

*The battle which took place tonight at Grovers Mill has ended in one of the most startling defeats ever suffered by any army in modern times; seven thousand men armed with rifles and machine guns… One hundred and twenty known survivors. The rest strewn over the battle area from Grovers Mill to Plainsboro, crushed and trampled to death … or burned to cinders.*

“Oh my god…” my voice came out choked.

The announcement ended, and the broadcast was redirected to a brief interlude while more information was collected. The music was uncharacteristically cheerful for such a dreadful event. I sat motionless, utterly shocked.

Then, suddenly, the weight of the moment really hit me and I scrambled to my feet. We were at w*ar.* I tripped over my skirts as I practically sprinted for the telephone. I picked up the receiver, and hesitated. Should I call my family? The police? Should I let Mary know she was right? In the end, I dialed the police.

After being redirected by the operator, I waited several moments for the police to pick up, but nothing happened. In the background, the music continued on. The silence on the other end of the receiver made me nervous. Evidently, something wasn’t right. My eyebrows knit together, and I counted to thirty before quietly setting the receiver down.

Before I could pick up the receiver and dial another number, the music cut out once again, and the broadcast was redirected back to Grovers Mill, New Jersey.

In an instant, the only thing I could hear was the agonizing sound of dying men. Their cries reverberated off the walls, closing in all around. I began to feel claustrophobic.

Then, the broadcast cut out yet again, and it was revealed that New York City was also under attack, with our army in utter disarray and unable to respond. With each passing second, another major city was revealed to be in the midst of battle. My mind couldn’t comprehend the scale of the attack. The country was entirely unprepared.

What followed can only be described as chaos. I sunk to the floor in terror.

From the jumble of panicked voices, a single word in particular stood out to me.

*Calm.*

I was completely overwhelmed by terror, yet I still felt a hysterical laughter burst forth at the word, high pitched and strained.

Calm. What a ludicrous idea.

We were at war. I was listening to the screams of men as they died on the battlefront. Calm was no longer an option.

An announcer was still speaking hastily into the microphone, attempting to drown out the screams in the background, but his words were no longer coherent. I curled into a ball, my knees pulled up against my chest, and just listened, terrified.

Then, an abrupt silence. Only the faint ticking of the clock to break the stillness.

With each passing second, the ticking grew more and more pronounced. The stillness closed in around me. My ears rang in the deafening silence. All the while, my heart beat in rhythm with the clock, an ominous death march.

The silence continued, unrelenting. My mind began to race, my thoughts only fueling my terrors. A cold sweat dampened my brow. I began to fidget, growing restless. Several more seconds passed. I wanted to escape. I had to escape.

And just as quick as it came, it relented. The radio crackled to life once again, dialogue interspersed with static. I took a deep breath in a vain attempt to calm my nerves. Outside, not a single leaf trembled. It was as if the entire world was holding its breath, awaiting the end.

An indescribable terror gripped my heart, and suddenly, I was running. Moving in a frenzied struggle to find an escape from my own fears. The front door loomed ahead.

Outside, I paused. With haggard breathing, I watched my breath condense in the cool night air. The surrounding fields were dark, barren. Slowly, I crept forward. Every rustling leaf was as loud as gunfire. Every mound of dirt was a charred corpse. Every shadow was an enemy soldier. I tried to swallow the knot of panic in my throat.

To my right, the trees loomed solemn and dark. For a brief moment, I allowed myself to stop and catch my breath. Knees shaking and lungs straining, I listened. In the distance, I heard the rustling of leaves. Spying the trees in the distance, I set off in a haphazard sprint. The open field felt too exposed.

As I fled further and further into the forest, I tripped and was sent sprawling to the ground, my hair fanning out behind me. There was a tearing sound as my dress ripped down one of the seams, and I quietly cursed.

Above, wispy black clouds drifted in front of the moon, obscuring what little light was available. I took a shuddering breath. The only light came from the glowing red light of Mars just above the silhouetted treetops.

For hours, I just sat there, alone in the chilly October air, wondering how long it would take before the soldiers came for me. I knew it was only a matter of time. They were reported to have already destroyed much of the east coast. It wasn’t going to be long until they moved from the cities into the countryside.

My heart ached for someone to share my burden, someone to ease my fears. I thought of Ralph. I thought of how terrible and unsupportive I had been, have always been. Again, the guilt returned.

As the night wore on, my fears began to ebb away. Several hours passed, and still no enemy soldiers emerged out of the bushes to attack. Reflecting back on the broadcast itself, I realized that the entire conquest of the east coast had taken place over the course of an hour, maybe two, which was a completely unrealistic time frame. I also came to realize that there was no reason to hold on to my fear. Panicking never did anyone any good. Though my fears began to dissipate, the guilt did not.

The moon was disappearing behind the treetops by the time my exhaustion overtook me.

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The morning air was damp. I sat up, detangling dried leaves and twigs from my hair, and glanced around. A light fog had settled in around the bases of the trees, obscuring the path I took into the forest. Sighing, I got to my feet, picked a direction at random, and set off.

After much wandering, I found my way from the cover of the forest, and began my steady trudge toward home. Though I crossed the same fields I had passed the night before, the soldiers that had hidden in its shadows were nowhere to be found.

As I got closer, I noticed our car was parked in the driveway. I reached down, and fiddled with my wedding ring absentmindedly while I worked up the courage to face the events of the night before.

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The radio broadcast I had heard those many years before was just a hoax, an elaborate prank. A number of years ago, a man gained international fame for his own radio broadcasts that struck fear and passion into the hearts of his listeners. However, these broadcasts were not a result of some hoax, and they had real and very drastic consequences.

The man who crafted these later broadcasts gained international fame. He never ceased to draw an audience. In his home country, his stories ignited the fantasies of a nation. His name was Hitler, and his war was real.

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Attribution of Research

Welles, Orson, dir. “The War of the Worlds.” By H.G. Wells. Adapt. Howard Koch. *Mercury Theater on the Air*. CBS Radio. WCBS, New York. 30 Oct. 1938. Radio.

* Police sirens were incorporated into the broadcast to convey a sense of realism
* Actors were hired to create the illusion of a crowd in the background of the broadcast reacting to the spectacle
* All four quotes incorporated in the narrative are directly from the transcript of the broadcast
* The broadcast was delivered in a series of announcements and news bulletins to convey a sense of realism
* There were frequent musical interludes throughout the broadcast
* Welles refers to the play as an “elaborate hoax” at the very end of the broadcast

*War of the Worlds.* Pbs, 2013. Film

* The broadcast lasted an hour from approximately 8 p.m. until 9 p.m.
* The beginning of the broadcast was reported to have taken place in a small town named Grovers Mill
* Most of the events occur in New Jersey until the very end of the broadcast
* Radio was the main source of news from families during the Great Depression
* Most families owned radios during the Great Depression, regardless of wealth
* There is an abrupt silence in the middle of the most climactic part in the play which adds to the suspense
* Following the broadcast, many people were reported to have fled their homes
* Many people also reported seeing/hallucinating charred corpses and black smoke
* The term martian was often misinterpreted as soldier
* The east coast faced the brunt of the destruction
* Mars was an object of fascination at the time, and most people could identify its location in the night sky
* The “war” which was reported during the broadcast never occurred
* No civilians were injured during the panic

McKay, John P. *A History of Western Society*. 10th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. Print.

* Automobiles were cheap enough that average families could afford them
* The broadcast took place during the Great Depression (1937)
* World War I was known as The Great War prior to World War II
* World War I ended in the month of November
* Telephones had multiple components, including the dial and the receiver
* Radios were controlled by dials
* The dials could be used to switch between multiple stations
* Phone calls had to be rerouted by an operator before a connection could be made
* The broadcast took place in October
* Hitler utilized the power of radio to indoctrinate the people of Germany
* The broadcast occurred prior to World War II
* People all over the world tuned in to hear Hitler’s speeches
* Hitler was usually regarded with fear and apprehension outside of Germany
* Hitler was admired by the people of Germany
* Soldiers were sent home during World War I if they sustained an injury that prevented them from fighting
* People in the US were listening to Hitler’s speeches with apprehension even before War of the Worlds broadcast